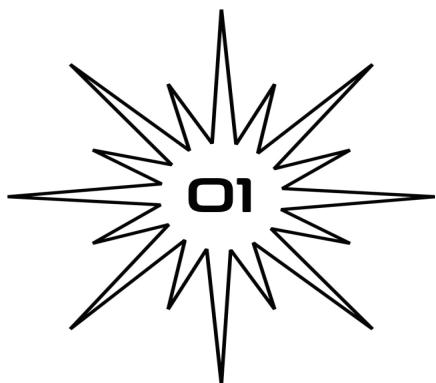


Part 01

Beta Four



I clutched a stone protruding from the steep cliff face, my fingers aching. Two other stones loomed a meter or so higher. If I couldn't reach up to grab them, my sweaty fingers would soon slip, and I would fall for sure.

Closing my eyes, I mentally focused on my real goal, not to climb my way out of a volcano, but to conquer this endurance test, make myself stronger for the next step—to find my father, likely banished to Beta Four, the frozen prison planet. To do that, I would need every gram of strength my body could provide. I had to be strong, for him.

I lifted my foot and pushed the toes of my sneaker into a tiny crag, then vaulted and grabbed the higher stones. But now my dangling feet had nothing to stand on, either stones or crags. A hundred meters below, a pool of lava waited for any misstep. Even from here I could feel the heat rising from the bubbling cauldron. One false move meant certain death. Or did it?

I whispered, "This isn't real. This isn't real." But my sweaty T-shirt and workout pants said otherwise, as did the pain roaring up and down my spine and into my trembling arms.

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A clicking sound rose from below. Still dangling, I searched for the source. A hairy spider five times my size skittered up toward me, seconds away, its fangs dripping green venom.

I muscled up with both hands and scabbled with my feet until one dug into another crag, then I leaped to the next handhold, then the next, clawing my way toward the top of the cliff. When I reached it and rolled onto the rocky ledge, I rose to all fours and looked down, gasping for breath as sweat dripped from my chin.

A loud thud reverberated. The spider dissolved into black sparkles and blew away like sooty dust. The lava cauldron disappeared, and the entire scene faded to white, revealing the four walls, ceiling, and floor of the ship's hologram training room, including the two circular heating coils that created the simulated lava's heat, still glowing orange but cooling quickly.

Leaning against a wall near the exit door, Crystal and Zoë looked on, both wearing workout tank tops. "Blazes, Megan," Crystal said. "Almost literally. But you were super quick."

Zoë rubbed the brand on her upper arm, probably inflamed by sweat from her climb a few minutes earlier. "Yeah, quicker than both of us. By far the fastest climb of the sisters trio."

I smiled. Zoë liked mentioning that we were sisters, all three infused with the same DNA. Not long ago, they chose to be marked on the upper arm with a dragon-shaped brand covered with my mother's ashes, a design that resembled my pirate brand. We didn't look alike at all—Crystal with lily-white skin and blonde hair, Zoë with ebony skin and black hair, and me with khaki skin and brown hair. No one would guess we considered ourselves sisters.

"I wonder how fast you could do it with your bracelets on," Crystal said. "Whered you put them?"

I pointed at the floor a few meters below. "Down there." Directly under me, my power bracelets lay where I had left them alongside my two necklaces, one holding my original dragon's eye locket and the other the locket I took from my mother's corpse. "Maybe a little faster with

them. They charge my leg muscles but not my arms. And everything seemed so dangerous. I might've been too amped up by adrenaline to remember to use them. Any idea why it was so hard?"

Sonya's half-human, half-mechanical female voice responded. "Because I set the motivation factors to nine out of ten." Her tone seemed more civil than usual, but it probably wouldn't last.

"That explains the giant spider and stalagmites," I said, "but what about the difficulty?" I sat upright and let my legs dangle over the edge of my perch, the ceiling about half a meter above my head. Several centimeters below my feet, two sets of moveable handholds and footholds slowly hummed downward on their tracks. Although the holographic images somehow made them look and feel like rocks, now they seemed ordinary, nothing more than simple white wall protrusions. "I could barely budge the handholds, even with all my strength."

"Because I increased the gear ratio to seven out of ten," Sonya said.

I narrowed my eyes. "So you set both the motivation and difficulty factors higher than usual?"

"Correct."

"But why? It's not like I'm training for the Galaxy Games."

"To allow you to collect more stress points in a short amount of time. You haven't made your goal for the week." Her tone shifted to snarky. "You were in the *slacker* category. Your success today raised you to merely *lazy*. Now you can work toward *wet-noodle* status."

Crystal flapped her lips. "Don't listen to that slave driver, Megan. You broke your mother's speed record, even at the tougher settings. You're the Astral Dragon's all-time female champ."

Sonya copied Crystal's lip noise. "So says the blonde bookworm. If she would pay as much attention to her own exercise instead of reading her badly written novels, she could rise above slimy-slug status."

"Hey!" Crystal pushed away from the wall. "I'm way stronger than a slug! And I'm not nearly as slimy!"

Zoë rolled her eyes. "Sonya, what is your snark level set at?"

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“One hundred percent. To answer in the common language for less-capable minds, my snark is at full throttle.”

Zoë set her hands on her hips. “Who gave that order and why?”

“Perdantus. He wanted to test his negotiation skills against a snarky opponent. Although he is literally a birdbrain, his conversational skills are better than I expected. His vocabulary is *recherché*.”

Crystal blinked. “What in blazes does *that* mean?”

“Exquisite,” I said. “Unusually high quality.”

Crystal huffed. “I call that a Willis word. You’ve been studying with Perdantus too much.”

“Yeah,” Zoë said. “I thought it meant highfalutin, pompous jibber-jabber. Come back to Planet Normal where you belong.” She looked at Sonya’s remote console, embedded in a wall alcove. “And set your snark level to zero. We’ve had enough of your digital lip.”

“Snark level will be set to zero in ten seconds,” Sonya said. “Only Captain Willis has immediate obedience authority, not so much for Lieutenant Bristle-brush hairdo. Have you ever heard of a comb? Or better, a garden rake?”

Zoë pinched the ends of her curls. “Is it that bad?”

Wincing, I replied in concert with Crystal. “Yeah. Pretty bad.”

“Don’t let Sonya get you down,” I said. “We’re all looking pretty rough. Three weeks in a wormhole without a shower will ripen anyone.”

“Ripen?” Crystal repeated. “You mean rot. Why does it take so long to travel, anyway? In a novel I read, ships could zap from one part of the galaxy to another in an instant.”

“Yeah. Fun stories but not real, at least not yet. The Alliance was working on instantaneous-travel technology, but for some reason, it was too dangerous. My father liked to talk about it. He told me people died in the tests.”

Crystal shuddered. “Okay. I’ll take slow, simmering stink over rotted-corpse stink any day.”

I smiled. "Glad you're adapting. But no worries. I'll fix the water pressure valve when we get to Beta Three. Someone there should have the part we need. Then we'll go to Beta Four to find my father. Until then, we'll have to endure bird baths from a basin."

Perdantus flew in, landed on Crystal's shoulder, and spoke in chirps, a language we all had learned. "A bird bath is quite suitable for a silver jay, but I ..." He grimaced. "What is that foul odor?"

Crystal smirked. "Me, Mr. Nimble-nose. I did my wall climb a little while ago." She lifted her arms. "I just need to air out a bit."

"You do that." Perdantus flew to Zoë's shoulder and inhaled, then grimaced again. "Unfortunately, the odor isn't much better over here."

"Get used to it." I scooted off the ledge and landed on the floor, bending my knees on impact. I picked up my locket necklaces and bracelets and snapped the bracelets on my wrists. "You're stuck with three smelly girls for a while."

Perdantus fluffed his feathers. "Very well. I realize that I was warned about this possibility. I will adapt."

"Good thing." I wrapped my old locket's chain around my neck and fastened it in back, then my mother's. "You don't have a choice."

"Captain Willis," Sonya said, "while you were exercising, I completed my analysis of the data drive you retrieved from the dead girl."

"What did you learn?"

"The data was encrypted using Alliance methods with which I am not familiar. You should keep the drive with you in case you have an opportunity to have it analyzed by an Alliance computer."

I frowned. "So you have no intel for me at all?"

"Not from the drive. Zoë scanned the documents from Thorne's lockbox and entered them into my system. I matched the names and addresses to people and places in a relatively new database. All but one of the people have been reported missing or dead. The one person who remains is named Omen. Thorne's scribblings revealed no last name."

"Omen?" I repeated. "Where does he live?"

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“According to an invoice Thorne kept, Omen lives on Delta Ninety-One, though Thorne’s poor handwriting makes me uncertain.”

“Delta Ninety-one? I’ve never heard of it.”

“It is an Alliance outpost planet,” Sonya said. “Its harsh environment makes it unsuitable for colonization. Only a few people live there, likely no more than a hundred.”

I nodded. “Understood. Maybe we can dig into it later.”

“According to Thorne’s paperwork,” Zoë said, “he was selling bee eggs and DNA to his customers. I guess that’s more valuable than glowsap because they could copy his mines on other planets. Plenty of people would pay a lot for that knowledge.”

“There is more,” Sonya said. “Based on Captain Willis’s estimate of how much bramble bee glowsap was in the Nebula One’s cargo hold, I conclude that Thorne and his contacts could not have harvested that much.”

“Well, maybe they’ve been storing it for years,” I said, “or even decades.”

“Negative. Glowsap is not flammable after one year. It is still valuable, but it would not create the massive explosion you experienced.”

I furrowed my brow. “Where else could Admiral Fairbanks have gotten so much glowsap?”

“According to my calculations, it is virtually impossible. Your estimate is twenty-three times more than all of Thorne’s contacts could have harvested in one year, assuming they had a mine as prolific as Thorne’s, which is unlikely for new operations.”

I nodded. “Right. Thorne had well-trained kids that—”

The lights in the room flashed off, then on, and continued like a strobe. “Warning,” Sonya said. “Anomalous readings from the wormhole indicate a potential collapse.”

I sucked in a breath. “Collapse? Is the warp engine malfunctioning?”

“That possibility exists. Not all readings are coming through. In any case, catastrophic damage is likely in less than five minutes at which time everyone on this ship will perish.”

“Can we just shut down the warp drive? Terminate the wormhole passage on our own?”

“Affirmative, but since the warp drive could be malfunctioning, that option might also be risky. We could end up in a deep space gap, and with the warp drive possibly broken, we would be marooned there.”

“I’ll take risky over certain death.” I waved a hand. “Crystal, Zoë. On my six.”

“On your six?” Crystal said. “What in blazes does that mean?”

“Follow me. I’ll explain later.” I dashed out the door to the lower-level hallway, scurried up the ladder to bridge level, and sprinted to the captain’s chair. The front viewing window displayed the scene in front of the ship. The surrounding tunnel of dazzling light appeared to be narrowing as an exit hole in the distance grew smaller and smaller.

Crystal and Zoë rushed onto the bridge and took their seats, Crystal in the first-mate’s chair, Zoë at the navigator’s station. Zoë read the data on her screens, her eyes darting. “Claw of the dragon! Everything’s scrambled. I can’t get a sensible reading.”

Crystal’s eyes widened as she looked out the window. “We’re about to get popped like a pimple!”

“Sonya,” I said, “the wormhole exit is closer than we calculated. That means the warp engines folded space fabric more than expected, but we’ll still come out in the Beta system, right?”

“Your explanation is not precise, but it is close. In short, if we can make it to the hole before the collapse is complete, we will exit relatively near our planned destination. If not, the Astral Dragon will disintegrate into millions of molecules dispersing across the galaxy.”

Crystal gulped. “I don’t like the sound of that.”

I toggled the switch that retracted the ship’s wings and grasped the steering yoke. “Sonya, I need data—current size of the hole relative to our ship, how many minutes till we reach it, the size it will be when we get there, and time till catastrophic wormhole collapse.”

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“The exit hole is currently one point nine times the size of our ship, and arrival will be in three minutes and seven seconds. At that moment, the hole will be point eight six times the ship’s size, which, of course, is too small for passage. Collapse will occur in two minutes and twenty-four seconds.”

“If we push the warp drive to maximum, can we make it out before the hole is too small?”

“Impossible to calculate in the time remaining. The Astral Dragon has never attempted a higher warp-drive setting than the current one, and since the drive could be malfunctioning, increasing the warp factor could—”

“Never mind. Everyone strap in. Perdantus, find a safe place. Too late to put on pressurized suits. They wouldn’t do us any good anyway.” While Perdantus flew out of the bridge area, I slung the seat straps over my body, buckled in, and unlocked the warp drive throttle on my console. The moment I heard two more clicks from Crystal’s and Zoë’s seats, I pushed the warp-drive throttle three notches higher to maximum.

The surrounding tunnel boundary blurred, and the exit hole shot toward us, shrinking like the jaws of a hungry beast. Colorful lights sparkled around the perimeter and radiated toward the center. Since our warp engine folded the space fabric, pushing the throttle merely crinkled the fabric further while leaving the exit point intact, a super dangerous shift since we didn’t have time for Sonya to calculate the results.

I pushed a button that set the targeting grid on the viewing window. “Be ready to fire at hostiles.”

“Why?” Zoë asked. “We’re not coming out at a common trade point. Pirates shouldn’t be around.”

“Not pirates. Prison guards.” I eyed the oncoming exit hole, now about thirty seconds away. “The warp shift could’ve altered our exit point enough to put us in range of Beta Four’s security scanners. The moment we punch through, I’ll need you to get a fix on our location.”

“Will do, Sister.”

“I’m locked and ready,” Crystal said as she grasped a targeting joystick with a trembling hand. “But blazes, Megan! How are you staying so calm? We’re an albatross trying to squeeze through a pigeonhole.”

“I know. It’ll be tight.” I checked the wing status—fully retracted. But, like Crystal said, the hole still looked too small. More sweat trickled down my already-damp back. In seconds, we could all be dead. “And trust me. I feel the danger. I’m just not showing it.”

“Yeah. Easy for the experienced pirate to say.” Crystal firmed her lips and stared straight at the viewing window. “Okay. I’ll be a Megan Willis clone. Bring it on. The more danger, the better.” She looked down, a skeptical frown growing. “It’s not working.”

Ahead, the hole shrank further, now looking much flatter, more like a coin slot than a wormhole exit. We could fit widthwise, but our height? I shook my head. Not good. Not good at all.

Sonya piped in. “Five seconds to exit. The hole is too volatile to determine its safety.”

“Everyone brace yourselves.” As we zoomed into the slot, I gritted my teeth and whispered to the Astral Dragon, the deity, not the ship, “Please help us.”

Something popped. Sizzles crackled all around. The ship’s lights flashed chaotically. Then everything fell dark and silent.